

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Gyanendra Pandey.** *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories.* Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005. 248 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5264-0; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5263-3.

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**Published on** H-Nationalism (May, 2007)

There is much to admire about Gyan Pandey's *Routine Violence*. The clarity and passion with which Pandey critiques Hindu nationalism, the rigor he applies to his analysis of national belonging, communitarian sentiment, and the possibilities (and pitfalls) of "the practice of coexistence" are invigorating and thought-provoking (p. 171). But the book is not really about explaining violence. Violence is a theme throughout the book, and a brilliant polemic in the first chapter questions the boundaries of our understanding of political violence, but, as a whole, the book is more about nationalist discourse and practice than it is about how nationalism leads to violence. I shall return to this in greater detail below.

The book is made up of eight inter-related chapters, most of which had already been published as independent essays over the course of the ten years between 1989 and 1999. Several of the chapters are urgent responses to the communal violence visited upon Muslim citizens of India. As Pandey himself writes in the opening of *Routine Violence*, "this book is about minorities, and hence majorities" and about the political processes which construct minorities as a distinct political category as well as a category of knowledge (p. 1).

The second chapter of the book, "In Defense of the Fragment," eloquently dissects how histories of communal violence are written. He questions the kind of nationalist history which sees violence as an aberration, as "mere glitches, the result of an unusual conjuncture of circumstances" (p. 33). Through analyzing pamphlets published by Hindu nationalist organizations, he shows the manner in which anxiety, gendered stereotypes, and prejudice are mobilized to make violence, and ultimately he aims to subvert "the totalizing standpoint of a seamless nationalism" (p. 43). The chapter has a brief and fascinating appendix, a response to "a right-wing journalist" who had obviously attacked Pandey upon the 1991 publi-

cation of this chapter as an essay in India. The journalist in question had denounced Pandey's defense of the fragment as "a defense of the fragmentation of India" (p. 44). In his brilliant riposte, Pandey explains his use of the term fragment (the kind of historical sources that are often neglected by mainstream historians) and asks how those who support the interests and demands of such minorities can "be called secessionists?" (p. 48).

The next two chapters examine in greater depth different aspects of the argument first introduced in chapter 2. Chapter 3, "The Nation and Its Pasts," delves into nationalist historiography and the manner in which it depends on the state archives and elite documents. It examines the struggles for the recovery of subaltern speech where the "access to the authentic voice and history of subordinated and marginalized groups" is circumscribed by the imbrication of popular forms, oral histories, and memories by "the language of the dominant and the privileged" (p. 62). This discussion, in some senses, extends the defense of the fragment and calls for an interrogation of "the historical construction of the totalities we work with, the contradictions that survive within [fragments], the possibilities they appear to fulfill, and the possibilities they suppress at the same time" (p. 67).

Chapter 4, by contrast, picks up the thread of sectarianism and communal violence through a fascinating study of the way in which the history of the Ayodhya Temple is constructed to specifically efface the Babari mosque. A detailed, attentive, intellectually brilliant, and empirically rich chapter, "Monumental History" is, in my opinion, the most luminous, coherent, and powerful section of the book. Its critical reading of nationalist history and the particular maneuvers that make its writing possible is useful not only in understanding the force of communal memorializing in India, but as a guide for understanding how such histories resonate and appeal to large pop-

ulations. It brilliantly discusses the discursive mechanisms by which the “Muslim” is transformed into an invader, the epic quality of such histories, nationalist historiography’s confident—one would say shameless—deployment of unsubstantiated assertions, and the elisions between culture, religion, and nation which make all of this possible.

The next three chapters examine the question of belonging, citizenship, and the construction of community. Chapter 5, “The Question of Belonging,” asks who can be Hindu, and in answering this question, fascinatingly tells us about the shifting boundaries of Hindu-ness and the manner in which such identities are constructed. It does so by laying out the case of the “untouchables” who, through “census redefinition, and the exceptional importance attached to numbers in the political and administrative,” were lost to—and later recovered by—Hindu nationalists. Pandey also discusses the representation of women in Hindu nationalism as another instance of the constructedness of national identities.

Chapter 6, “Marked and Unmarked Citizens,” also looks at national belonging, this time shifting the vantage point of the problematic, asking whether Muslims belong and who is Indian. Because he discusses how these questions shaped Indian nationalism at its most decisive moment (in the immediate post-independence period), it tells us something about the ways in which the exclusivity of nationalism were written into the original discourse of the nation-state.

Chapter 7, “Cognizing Community,” returns again to the shifting boundaries of the nation, and to the Dalits specifically. Here, Pandey insists that the asymmetries of power and the machinations of politics that goes into the building of communities, and persuasively argues that “coexistence” can mean a virulent “adjacency” within existing and profoundly unequal hierarchies of power (p. 171). As such ideas of tolerance or diversity can mean “little or nothing from the Dalits’ point of view—for those who find themselves at the bottom of the heap” (p. 171).

The final chapter of the book, “The Secular State,” is an astute critique of calls for dialogues on secularism as a preamble to communal coexistence, and again insists persuasively on re-introducing power and inequality in discussions of communal interrelations. It argues for a recognition that communal relations and inter-communal negotiations are primarily *political* and calls for greater skepticism toward the

state’s claims of liberality or its neutral mediating role, when the state is “more than willing to negotiate through undisguised violence—within the borders of their countries as well as outside them” (p. 190).

The book is eloquent, urgent, and important, even if many of its arguments give one a sense of *deja vu*: for example, the defense of fragments reminds one of Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), while Pandey’s discussion of subaltern voice is reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1988) or Shahid Amin’s *Event, Metaphor, Memory* (1995). Where Pandey critically deconstructs particular discourses, specific phenomena, and certain events, his writing is incisive, his language fluid and fast-moving, and his manner of analysis inspiring.

My only substantive (and substantial) criticism regards how the theme of violence is treated in the book. The first chapter of the book, “Negotiating the Boundaries of Political Violence,” is an immensely readable polemic which perceptively deconstructs the usage of the term “violence” in mainstream parlance. Pandey reminds us that “suicide bombings in Palestine and Iraq” are considered violence, “but not the razing of civilian homes and entire villages by Israeli and American tanks and missiles from the air”; “machetes and hatchets, but not guillotines ... or ... electric chair”; “Muslim fanaticism, but not Christian wars of religion (medieval or modern)” (p. 3). He then does an all-too-brief tour of the classics which consider violence a residual category, rather than the “endemic” nature of violence in modern society (p. 7).

All of this is suggestive and, had it been discussed in greater depth, could have been an extraordinarily useful theoretical contribution to our understanding of our modern life. Although violence is present throughout the book, Pandey never explicitly tells us about the precise mechanisms which lead vast numbers of peoples from nationalist, or communitarian, or sectarian sentiment to the moment of violence. Much of the book discusses how nationalist discourse and historiography *legitimate* violence, but not how ordinary persons can be persuaded to wreak havoc upon their neighbors, acquaintances, and co-citizens. He tells us that at the fateful moment when the Babari mosque was destroyed by Hindu nationalists in December 1992, “an assembled crowd of several hundred thousand” was present (p. 96), but not how these hundreds of thousands of people were moved to com-

mit such violence against other Indians.

This silence leaves one with a series of unanswered questions: are ordinary people so easily persuaded by the virulence of nationalist historiography? What are the concrete means by which the hegemonic narrative of Hindu superiority is absorbed and accepted by the aforementioned “assembled crowd” of hundreds of thousands?

In not answering these urgent and important questions, Pandey comes dangerously close to essentializing violence. Even “routine” occurrences occur for specific reasons. By not telling us what these reasons are, Pandey seems to suggest that violence be-

comes something inherent—to humanity, to Hindu nationalist, or to whomever. In writing about how communitarian or nationalist historiography legitimates violence, Pandey lucidly illuminates the process by which such violence is legitimated, but there is a long distance between legitimation of violence and the direct participation of large crowds in the practice of violence. This is certainly a vexed problem, and perhaps even one for which no solution is to be found; but Pandey is such a persuasive, passionate, and incisive analyst that one wishes he could have interrogated this question in greater depth and with more focus to better flesh out what is a suggestive argument in an interesting book.

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**Citation:** Leleh Khalili. Review of Pandey, Gyanendra, *Routine Violence: Nations, Fragments, Histories*. H-Nationalism, H-Net Reviews. May, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13148>

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